

Stanley Kauffmann on films

Z
(Cinema V)

In The Year of The Pig (Pathe Contemporary)

An exciting film on an agonizing subject. Three years ago Vassilis Vassilikos, a Greek writer now living in Paris, published a novel called *Z*, a thinly disguised account of the murder of Gregorios Lambrakis in 1963. Lambrakis, a leftist deputy and a professor of medicine at the University of Athens, had just addressed a meeting in Salonika protesting the deployment of Polaris missiles in Greece when he was knocked down by a small truck; and investigation proved it was not an accident. In Greek the initial Z stands for *zei* - "he lives" - just as, in Italian, *VV* stands for *viva*.

Jorge Semprun, himself a well-known novelist, has written the screenplay of the novel with Constantin Costa-Gavras, the director. (The latter's previous film was *The Sleeping Car Murders*.) The film was made in North Africa apparently - in French, and is shown here with English subtitles. It is flawlessly acted, sharply edited, and excellently photographed in color by Raoul Coutard. (Though the print shown to the press in New York was scratchy and poor.) Costa-Gavras has directed with fire but without much rhetoric. In the script there are polemical touches; in the direction there is passion but only a little dice-loading. It is not a drama of political ideas but of action in the political area. There is no political thought in it, to speak of - no more, say, than the décor in a John LeCarré espionage thriller. We see the results of political conviction, in physical and moral courage.

There is no mystery. The film begins with officialdom's intent to harass opposition, its bland harassments while mouthing democratic platitudes, its

contention that the death was an accident. We know otherwise. (Neither Greece nor Athens nor Salonika is mentioned, but show signs and newspapers are Greek.) The matter would rest there, sat upon by the beefy rumps of generals and police chiefs, except for the young investigating magistrate who is brought in to put a quietus on the matter and who disappoints his superiors. It is he who is the hero of this film, not the deputy, who is only the occasion.

Thus this is not a story of politics but of a quest for justice, of an investigator who presumably would have followed the facts wherever they led him politically. Without such a magistrate, the truth of the matter would have been irrelevant, and so would the protests of the dead man's friends. (Most of them were conveniently murdered soon after.) In fact, the doing of justice didn't really result in anything; the colonels took over the government in a few years anyway. But the struggle between idealism and power is always a good subject for fiction, in film or elsewhere; perhaps one of the justifications of fiction is to keep that struggle alive, to provide a point of tension against the world of fact in the newspapers.

For Americans, the added horror of this film is that the muscle behind the Greek government is American. I and many others have heard Andreas Papatheou, the former opposition leader, talk about arrant CIA influence on the colonels, which no one has really bothered to deny. After a short respectful pause, as a brief obeisance to democratic process, American military aid and corporate investment and tourism resumed. And - a private event of such a character that it is not immune from comment - the widow of a murdered American President married a chief financial backer of this government of unmistakable oppressors and torturers.

Fundamentally, what *Z* dramatizes is something more terrible than anything we see. The argument for American interference in Greece is, as usual, that Communism was stopped, although the recent report of the Council of Europe denies that a Communist takeover was imminent in 1967. If there had been such a takeover, few of us believe that Communist officials would be less cruel than those we see here. But, as usual, that argument excludes a middle: and, as usual, American democracy ends up supporting gross

reactionaries (no matter how labeled) against dogmatic leftists. The murder of the deputy is a factor of political war; in a non-cynical way, we can get hardened to such acts. But the soul-shaking threat to the future is that men interested in truth - men like the magistrate, uncommitted to dogma - may not arise, or may not want to. That may be the real price we pay for putting iron lids on troubled countries.

The physical impression that this film gives is that it is hurrying to record certain facts before they are covered over. Motion is of the essence. Costa-Gavras's camera tracks and dollies almost constantly, yet without dizzying us (unlike a recent Czech fiasco called *Sign of the Virgin*) because all the motions are tightly linked to the impulses of the characters or of the audience. We insist that the camera move as it does, so the tracking both feeds and stimulates our concern. It looks as if Coutard has used long-focus lenses for much of his close work, particularly outdoors, which gives many of the close-ups and two-shots a grainy, unglamorous, almost journalistic feeling, as if we had been magically allowed to get near. And there are some shots that are almost salon gems, like one of an official's head against a white wall with some framed photographs on it - something out of Erich Salomon.

There are some traces of slanting in the script. When the doomed deputy arrives at the airport, he stops to shake hands with a porter. (Wouldn't a fascist demagogue do the same?) After he is killed, his wife moons around his hotel room and weeps over his shaving lotion. (Don't the wives of murdered fascists miss them?) One of the two murderers is an aggressive homosexual. (Is that a fascist monopoly in the Middle East?) All the government men, except for the magistrate, are pompous and slimy. All the opposition men are variously brave and sincere. But then this film is not a tragedy, at least not in the Hegelian sense: the opposition of two partial truths, each of which thinks itself whole. It is an intelligent drama, intended to whip up sympathy for one (necessarily) partial truth. Which it does.

Yves Montand as the murdered man and Jean-Louis Trintignant as the magistrate, are simple and strong; Georges Geret is appealing as a witness whose testimony is crucial but who is absolutely apolitical and who just wants amiably to report what he

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actually saw. Renato Salvatori and Marcel Bozuffi freeze one's marrow as the two murderers. Charles Denner (of *Landru* and *Life Upside Down*) plays a leftist lawyer with his typical immediacy and heat. I have no flat rules about filmgoing, but if I had, one of them would be never to miss a film with Denner.

More indictment of America, also justified. Concurrent with reports of the US Army's slaughter of 567 Vietnamese villagers - accompanied of course by President Thieu's quick denial - comes a documentary called *In the Year of the Pig*. A misleading title; the film has nothing to do with Weathermen or Chicago '68. I don't know what the title means.

This is an account of the progressive American involvement in Vietnam, from the beginning, and was made by Emile de Antonio, co-maker of the Joe McCarthy documentary, *Point of Order*. De Antonio got his film clips from American TV, from East Germany and Prague, and has interwoven them with good interviews that he made for this picture, with such subjects as Jean Lacouture (author of a fascinating biography of Ho Chi Minh), Senator Thruston Morton, Roger Hilsman, Harrison Salisbury, David Halberstam, Father Daniel Berrigan, and several others. Professor Paul Mus of Yale discusses Vietnamese cultural attitudes, which America disregards. (Two and a half years ago, in a series in the *Atlantic*, Frances FitzGerald made this same point about cultural barriers that force us to view Vietnam through American eyes. The situation seems unchanged.)

Most of De Antonio's picture is straightforward, and therefore heart-breaking. Some of it is facile. (If you juxtapose subsequent events against public remarks, what political figure could not in some way be made ridiculous?) And occasionally the editing is tendentious. (A shot of an old Vietnamese woman crawling among ruins is followed by a shot of a smiling US soldier who may or may not have been looking at her.) But the sum is depressingly forceful.

There are no surprises in it except the scary surprise that much of the story has already lapsed from memory. Remember President Eisenhower welcoming President Diem as a great hero?

sequences are not as effective as those in Eugene Jones's *A Face of War* because, for one reason, they pay small attention to American suffering in the war and, for another, they are too long - the picture's point is political. In that sphere it makes its mark, showing lucidly how we got into Vietnam, how stupid and corrupt the maneuvers were that got us there, and how millions are suffering every day in a war that virtually no one except the Saigon government wants but that continues simply because people can't agree on a way to stop it.